



### **DOCTOR POZZI AT HOME**

In June 2015 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York mounted a stunning exhibition of ninety paintings and drawings by the famous American artist John Singer Sargent. Dominating one large gallery was a huge portrait titled *Dr. Pozzi at Home* which was painted in 1881. It stands out amidst the generally muted portraits of Sargent's friends and patrons because of its luminous scarlet color -

what one art historian called an “ode to red.” The New York Times reviewer described, the subject Dr. Samuel-Jean Pozzi as a “glamour-boy gynecologist to the stars.” Or as one early art historian suggested, “This vision of a gorgeous man dressed to match a sumptuous red interior could not be more theatrical. The palate triggers associations of blood, passion, luxury and devilishness while the dressing gown echoes the scarlet robes worn by cardinals.” Certainly, the appearance is not that of a staid physician in black frock coat of Belle Epoque France; rather, more that of a self-assured Spanish grandee painted in the style of Velazquez.

In the full length life-sized portrait (he was more than six feet tall) Dr. Pozzi is a model of masculine virility, resplendent in an ankle length scarlet dressing gown which covers a white night-shirt with ruffled collar and sleeves. An embroidered slipper peaks out from below the robe and the handsome figure is set against a backdrop of crimson drapes. Then 35 years old, apparently the doctor enjoyed posing, while plucking at the robe's collar he looks away from the viewer as if certain that he is having an effect. Aside from Pozzi's bearded face, the viewer's eyes are drawn to his hands - surprisingly slender, almost effeminate - the very same spidery fingers that soon would popularize bimanual pelvic examinations among his medical colleagues (without gloves of course) which he described as "the most admirable method of investigation that perhaps exists in gynecology."



Apparently Pozzi's patients agreed. Because of his good looks, affable charm and cultured demeanor, one female friend called him "the Love Doctor" — his pupils nicknamed him "The Siren" while to his famous lover Sarah Bernhardt he was *Doctor Dieu* (Doctor God.)

Samuel Pozzi may have been a vain dandy in private life, but he was a dedicated and respected physician who during his career published more than 400 journal articles and his 1000 plus pages textbook of gynecology, a standard for more than four decades, was translated into five languages. When only a young doctor,

Pozzi wrote to his beloved grandmother that “The study of the sufferings of Man is one of the best, the highest callings that I could have undertaken and my soul is compensated as my heart in accomplishing this mission.” He was a disciple of the famed neuroanatomist Paul Broca and although today no familiar eponyms recall Pozzi’s name, during his time some considered him to be the “father” of gynecology in France. He established the first surgical service devoted to diseases of women and his ascent up the academic ladder culminated in 1901 when he was appointed as the first professor of gynecology at the University of Paris. A medical colleague once described Pozzi as “a powerful and irrepressible force of life whose exuberance nevertheless blended well with a natural grace and courtesy that made him a model for all of who worked with him.” He certainly was a splendid sartorial figure on rounds, favoring spotless white overalls and a black surgeon’s cap.

Samuel Pozzi was an early advocate of Lister’s antiseptic techniques, visited his colleague in Edinburgh to study his techniques first hand and then introduced many of them in Paris with excellent results. In Scotland he not only learned to wash his hands but learned the advantage of using absorbable catgut for suturing and, from then on, he insisted on scrupulous cleanliness in the operating room. Fluent in English, in 1892 Dr. Pozzi made the first of three trips to the United States to learn what new practices were being employed there. He loved the informality and willingness to share of American surgeons, who called him Sam, and he was able to visit the Chicago World’s Fair where he sampled such American staples as Aunt Jemima’s pancakes, Cracker Jacks and Juicy Fruit gum. Upon his return he introduced many innovations in the about to be rebuilt Broca Hospital: central heating, ventilation of wards, electrification, an aseptic operating room. In these fact-finding excursions he visited the Mayo Clinic, Johns Hopkins and hospitals in St. Louis, Chicago, Boston and Rochester. On Pozzi’s last trip in 1909 he visited Alexis Carrel at the Rockefeller Institute in New York City and was intrigued by his expatriate countryman’s vascular surgery skill and impressed by Carrel’s novel experiments with organ transplantation.

When Sargent and Pozzi first met at a salon in 1880, the artist was 24, the doctor, about ten years older. He had recently married a wealthy heiress and the portrait commissioned by Pozzi was painted at their luxurious and home at 10 Place Vendome which, as was stylish at the time, featured a red interior. Evidently Sargent recognized a kindred aesthete in Pozzi and gave much thought about how to pose him. After its completion the painting was displayed at exhibitions in London and Brussels but reactions were mixed. The hint of eroticism outraged many sober viewers and not all art critics were impressed — one scoffed “it contains, like a champagne glass filled too quickly, more foam than golden wine.” (*John Singer Sargent: The Sensualist* by Trevor J. Fairbrother, 2000.)

Such reactions didn't disturb Pozzi and, although the painting was never publicly displayed in France, it served to enhance the doctor's notoriety as a sensualist. It's tempting to speculate that this didn't inhibit his bedside manner — which one suspects sometimes may have progressed from *beside* to *upon* the beds of wealthy women. However, modern historians insist that Pozzi generally kept his professional and personal services to the ladies separate. As Caroline de Costa concluded, “While Pozzi led a full and active professional life and a full and active social life, the two were clearly demarcated.” Another biographer Dr. Claude Vanderpooten wrote that “Samuel loved women, loved them passionately, like everything which is beautiful...blonde or dark, slender or voluptuous...he devoted his life to them.”

As a patron of the arts, Samuel Pozzi was a well-known figure in *fin-de-siecle* salons. His friends, acquaintances and patients included Claude Monet, Auguste Rodin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Darwin, Emile Zola, George Bizet, Marcel Proust, Georges Clemenceau, Alexander Dumas, Alfred Dreyfus, Gustave Eiffel, Anatole France and Marie Curie. The list of his intimates was equally impressive but surely the most famous was Sarah Bernhardt, known to all as “the Divine Sarah.” The daughter of a Dutch courtesan and an unknown father, she was the



most celebrated actress of her time — perhaps of any time — described recently as “the first international superstar.”

The two first met at a salon in 1869 when he was a 23 year old medical student while she, two years older, was becoming the toast of Paris. She was flirtatious, seductive and throughout her life would have untold admirers and paramours - marriage never deterred her. But evidently Sarah’s great love was *Doctor Dieu* - their torrid, but on again off again, love affair lasting for about ten years. Sometimes they communicated three or four times a day and her feeling is evident in hundreds of letters written by Sarah to Sam (his letters to her were lost) as described in *The Diva and Doctor God* by Caroline de Costa and Francesca Miller (2010.) What follows here are but a few feverish tidbits:

*My Sam I love you I love you and I am yours... Come and take me, if it can be done great will be my joy.*

*My much desired Sam, my beloved master, I am yours to die of love.... I am yours unto madness...*

*To my Doctor God, to the Being I adore and admire and to whom I would happily give my life...*

But both lovers were ambitious and determined to pursue their respective careers which demanded very different life styles. Their passion cooled when Pozzi married the wealthy Marie-Therese Loth-Cazalis in 1879. It turned out to be a long but unhappy relationship, not helped by his wife's insistence that her meddling mother live with them, nor by Pozzi's frequent absences on medical matters and his absorption with collecting antiquities and coins and pursuing interests in the arts, science, politics and fencing. Although Samuel and Therese retained a civil public relationship and entertained frequently and lavishly, in private they battled endlessly and in later years lived apart.

The ardor between Sam and Sarah Bernhardt may have lessened after he married Therese (evidently more on his part than hers) but the two maintained an active correspondence and he continued to advise the actress on medical matters. In 1898 she refused to permit anyone but him to resect a large ovarian cyst. Sarah also suffered from a chronically infected knee, the result of an injury sustained during a performance, and in 1915 when the pain became unendurable, she wrote to Samuel:

*Listen to me, adored friend. I beg you to cut off my leg a little above the knee. Do not protest. I have perhaps ten or fifteen years left. Why condemn me to constant suffering? Why condemn me to inactivity? Even with a celluloid cast I shall be handicapped and won't be able to perform. And horror of horrors, I shall always be in pain.*

Dr. Pozzi, who at the time was away serving in the army at age sixty-eight, arranged for an amputation to be performed by a colleague and about the time of the surgery, Sarah Bernhardt wrote this to her *Docteur Dieu*:

*How is it that my infinite love and gratitude over so many years have not actually taken root and blossomed in your heart? How is it that I feel the need to tell you again and again that there is no being dearer to me than you? I love you with all the vital and intellectual force of my being, and nothing, nothing can change this feeling, greater than friendship, more divine than romantic Love.*

Amputation didn't stop the indomitable diva. Eschewing a wooden prosthesis, she arranged to be carried by porters on a gilded litter and went off to entertain the troops going as close to the front as allowed. The following description by a fellow performer wonderfully captured the scene:

*The flimsy curtain fluttered open to reveal a wisp of an aging woman propped...in a shabby armchair. Then the wisp began her lines and the miracle took place...Sarah, old, mutilated, once more illuminated a crowd by the rays of her genius...When she wound up her recitation two thousand men rose to their feet cheering...She is greater perhaps in this glowing twilight than in the sparkling days of her apogee.*

Although Samuel Pozzi's charm, intelligence and wit were irresistible to the ladies, his most long-lasting extra-marital affair began during the 1890s when he met Emma Bischoff, a wealthy Jewish socialite, who, when Therese refused a divorce, remained the doctor's mistress and travel companion for some twenty-four years until his death in 1918.

At the end of the same gallery in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition of John Singer Sargent's paintings, hung perhaps his most famous portrait, now known to all as *Madame X*, which caused a sensation when exhibited at the Salon in 1916.





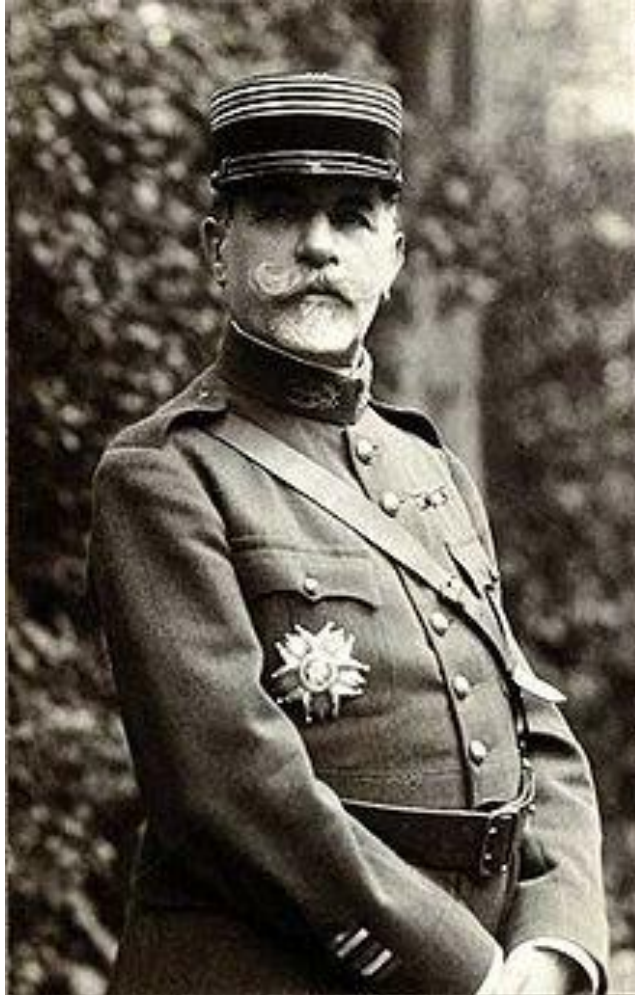
As the *Times* recently reported, she was “the young Parisian socialite Virginie Amelie Avegno Gautreau, whose ‘new woman’ image - plunging black dress, lavender-powdered skin, and air of aloof disdain - threatened to send Sargent’s reputation off the tracks.” Louisiana born of Creole descent, Amelie was reputed to be the most beautiful woman in Paris and was married to a banker twice her age. Perhaps because her portrait has often been juxtaposed by museum curators of Sargent exhibits with *Dr. Pozzi at Home*, there have been persistent rumors that she was the gynecologist’s sometime lover. They certainly were acquaintances, but current day historians are adamant that there was never a romantic connection between the two — of course not all of Samuel Pozzi’s soulmates were bedmates and he had many platonic female friends. Sargent’s painting of the bare-shouldered voluptuous *Madame* caused such a scandal that

he fled Paris and resettled in London. Amelie's reputation was ruined and in 1915, shortly after she died in relative obscurity, Sargent sold the portrait to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and asked that her name be removed —thus the title *Madame X*.

As an artist John Singer Sargent has been described as a “sensualist” and perhaps this may have carried over to his personal life. He was a confirmed bachelor, painfully shy in public, and it seems possible that he was a closeted homosexual. Bernard Berenson suggested that he had a gift for “the sensory revelation of character” and one of Sargent's biographers (T.J. Fairbrother) perceived a “hidden sexuality” and “particular interest in masculinity.” Sargent always insisted that he only painted what he saw, never introducing his own feelings, so we can only imagine the effect the virile Dr. Pozzi may have had upon him. In later years the two remained friends, corresponding, and the doctor visiting after Sargent's move to London. Sargent's portrait *Dr. Pozzi at Home* remained in the family's possession and was rarely shown in public until it was purchased by Armand Hammer and in 1990 placed on permanent display in Hammer's museum in Los Angeles.

With advancing age, Samuel Pozzi developed a paunch, the black beard transformed to a white goatee and although he still dressed elegantly, no longer as flamboyantly. Then on June 13, 1918, the 72 year old gynecologist was shot to death in his consulting room — not, as one might imagine, by a jealous husband but by a disgruntled patient. About three years earlier Pozzi had removed a scrotal varicocele - a minor procedure, but the man attributed his impotence and other problems to what he perceived to be a failed operation. He insisted that Dr. Pozzi correct the problem but when refused, because this could not possibly remedy the man's various problems, the enraged lunatic shot his surgeon four times in the abdomen, then killed himself. An emergency laparotomy was unsuccessful and, at Dr. Pozzi's request, he was buried in his military uniform,

the Legion of Honor and other medals pinned on his chest — resplendent to the end.



Michael Nevins. [mnevmd@att.net](mailto:mnevmd@att.net)